Interview with Robert L. Nichols

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ROBERT L. NICHOLS

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ENTRANCE INTO USIE (PREDECESSOR OF USIA)

Q: Bob, let's start at the beginning in this review. What induced you to look to USIA or whatever existed at the time as a career?

NICHOLS: I suppose it started during World War II when I served in the Navy in Asia, and at the latter part of the war, I was in China briefly. I sort of determined for the usual idealistic reasons, you know, no more wars, things like that, that I wanted to go into the Foreign Service, the diplomatic service.

So then I had to come back and complete my education at Tufts University, and at Fletcher School for an M.A. degree. Then it was just a question of getting into the Foreign Service. At the time, recruiting was clogged up.

Q: This is what period?

NICHOLS: This is 1950-51. Fletcher people in those days, would make a spring pilgrimage to Washington, and I did that. In the corridors of the State Department I ran into a Fletcher

graduate of two years previous, whom I had known as a neighbor in the veterans' housing, Bob McKinnon. Bob is listed on the plaque in the diplomatic entrance to the State Department where all those who died in the service of their country are commemorated. Bob died in Africa about 30 years ago. The end of the Fifties, probably.

Bob said, “What are you doing here?”

I said, “I'm job hunting.”

He said, “Are you interested in the Philippines?”

I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Come with me.” He took me into the Office of Philippine Affairs of USIE. I didn't know what it was, but it was part of the State Department. He introduced me to Katherine Porter, and she proceeded to sit me down and talk to me about my interest in the Philippines. She decided, by the end of the interview, that I was the right person to go to a one-man post in Davao, in the southern Philippines.

Q: But didn't you have to come in through the regular channel? How come you were being recruited in the corridor, as it were?

NICHOLS: I had taken the Foreign Service exam the year I entered Fletcher and just missed passing it. I had not taken it gain, but at that time there were other ways to enter the Foreign Service. Then even those who had passed the exam were put on a waiting list for their oral interviews. So I had not retaken it, although that was in my future plans. But when I went into the office, they were recruiting. Katherine Porter was recruiting for what was called U.S. Information and Educational Program, or USIE, an was then part of the State Department.

Q: And that's what you were recruited for.

NICHOLS: That's what I was recruited for. I didn't know what it was all about, but it sounded fascinating, as Katherine Porter explained what they did. I had no idea there was an information program. I didn't know what an information program was, but that is how I was recruited.

Q: You were interested in the Foreign Service mainly from a career and maybe idealistic point of view.

NICHOLS: That's right, yes.

Q: Do you think that many of the people entering the Foreign Service in those days were so motivated?

NICHOLS: I think, by and large, most of us were. We came in as “FSS-11s,” which was just above a secretarial level, and I was recruited to replace a person who is today well known in USIA history, Cliff Forster. Cliff at the time was Branch PAO in Davao, and I was recruited to take his place when his tour was up.

I had to wait for the usual FBI checks and various other procedures to be completed, and I remember Katherine Porter telling me, because I was also being recruited by CIA at the time, “If they (CIA) come through first, let me know and we'll speed things up.” Well, they did, and I called Washington, and they sped their check up enough to enable me to turn down the CIA job. The USIS one seemed more appealing, even though I wasn't sure what it was all about.

Q: Did you have a background in dealing with words, communication, information?

NICHOLS: Not really. All I had was a history/political science major in college, and I'd gone to Fletcher with a concentration on international law, international economics, and diplomacy, the courses that they teach there. Asia was my special interest, but I actually had no real specialization in Asia or on China.

Q: What did you know about the information program at that time? This was 1951, right?

FIRST ASSIGNMENT: DAVAO, PHILIPPINES

NICHOLS: Correct. What I knew about it was what I had learned from Katherine Porter that day in the office, and from my discussion with Bob McKinnon, who had served in Cebu as Branch PAO. He was an FSO waiting to be integrated into the State Department at the time.

Q: So your first post then was a one-man post in the Philippines.

NICHOLS: Yes. The State Department took terrible chances. They sent us out there with very little training. I had about six weeks in Washington in the summer of 1951. Then my wife and my two children and I were sent out to the Philippines. I spent a couple of months in Manila before I was sent for a brief one-week stay in Davao with Cliff Forster. I think Cliff had to put his stamp of approval on me. I'm not sure, but I believe that's how the final decision was made to send me there.

Q: You were there, then, for the first several years?

NICHOLS: I was there for about two and a half years, until the end of '53.

Q: What are some of the experiences you recall from those first exposures? What problems did you face?

NICHOLS: I remember very clearly one thing, and when I think about it now and I shudder a bit. It was a one-man post, really an outpost, because there were about three American businessmen in town. One ran the CALTEX plant there, and a couple of them were in the hemp business. There was a Chinese consul from the Nationalist Government, and I was the only other so-called diplomatic representative. But, of course, the Filipinos were much more impressed with an American than they were with a Chinese. Even though this was a

rather senior Chinese career diplomat who had been in the Chinese service for 20 years, and here this brand-new, wet-behind-the-ears 26-year-old arrives, and I was made out to be much more important. He rode around in a Cadillac; I rode around in a jeep. But when there was any sort of parade, the jeep was always in front of the Cadillac. (Laughs) But that isn't what embarrassed me so much.

I was interviewed when I first got there by the newspapers, and this was all sort of an exhilarating and a somewhat overwhelming experience for somebody of my age and experience. So the headline—I still have it in the scrapbook, and I just shudder—it says, “Nichols Vows Make Democracy Grow Stronger.” Well, I always remember this because I think it depicts the sort of arrogance that we Americans have.

Q: Or hopefulness, perhaps.

NICHOLS: Hopefulness and a certain amount of arrogance, that we know how to do this, and we can go out and do this. I could go into this new environment, the Philippines, that I was just learning about, despite having served there during the war, and I could make a vow like that! Then I think about where the Philippines is today and what we have done there and haven't done there, and how “successful” we've been, it's a little . . .

NATURE OF USIS PROGRAM IN DAVAO

Q: This was the time of Magsaysay.

NICHOLS: Before Magsaysay. I was there when Magsaysay was elected, and that was another experience that I often think about. It has to do with what I was saying about American “arrogance.” This was during the period of Hukbalahaps. This was the period when the Philippines were under the threat of being taken over by the Communists—the early 1950's. The USIS information program there at the time was largely a negative anti-Communist program. The exception was the libraries, because there was very little going on in exchanges. Most programs were mass media, the press, the publications type

of program, and we were putting out comic books and leaflets, anti-Communist leaflets. Again I look back and shudder, because I've seen these same things put out in China and other places where they depict the U.S. in a negative way. We were doing the same things in the Philippines in 1951-52.

Mindanao happened to be a place where there was less of a Huk (Hukbalahap) threat in the Philippines. Today it's quite a different story, but then it was the one area of the Philippines where the threat of the Huks taking over was minimal. I liked the positive programs, and I kept saying, “Let's do some more with the positive programs.” So we got involved in helping what was then called ECA, the AID type of programs of today, working with them information-wise on positive things in Mindanao. And that helped a lot.

Q: The early 1950's were also the time of Senator McCarthy. Did you have some fallout from that?

NICHOLS: Yes, at the latter part of my stay in the Philippines, during the Cohn-Schine visits to the European USIS libraries. They didn't visit the Philippines, fortunately, but there was fall-out. We began to get orders to take certain books off the shelves. I refused to take Howard Fast's books off the shelves in Davao. There were also some articles in certain magazines and we were told to remove those magazines. Again it was something that I just refused to do. I was in a one-man post, and nobody really ever checked up on me. But it had an effect on me, very definitely.

AMERICAN SUPPORT IN MAGSAYSAY ELECTION

This was also a period—you asked me about Magsaysay. Well, he ran for president of the Philippines in 1953, and if ever the United States interfered in a foreign election, it was that year. It's interesting because there was an organization called NAMFREL, National Movement for Free Elections. An organization of the same name was involved in electing Mrs. Aquino here a couple of years ago. But in 1953 we were providing the financial support for NAMFREL, the leaflets were printed at the RPC (our press and printing center)

in Manila. I remember being confronted by the mayor of Davao, saying, “The Americans are supporting Magsaysay. They're participating, interfering in the elections.”

I said, “No, we are just supporting NAMFREL, the National Movement for Free Elections. We support free elections.” Well, of course, supporting free elections in the Philippines was support to Magsaysay.

This was also the period when the Philippines became the training grounds for the whole Vietnam experience. Colonel Ed Lansdale, who later became well known in Vietnam for directing the psy-war campaign, was running Magsaysay's behind-the-scenes campaign in the Philippines. So it was a period which predated all of this counterinsurgency type of win-the-hearts-and-minds-of-the-people sort of thing.

Q: Also, this period then launched the career of one Robert Nichols with an emphasis always in your career in the Far East, is that right?

NICHOLS: Not always.

Q: Not always, but with an emphasis, in any case. Just to project ahead, you went from there to Italy, and then to Amsterdam, back to Washington, and then Hong Kong and further experiences in the Far East.

NICHOLS: Yes.

Q: Ending, again in the Far East, your last assignment, I think, overseas was PAO Taipei?

NICHOLS: No, Singapore. My last overseas assignment, yes.

Q: And then Washington. Looking back again to those early years of your time, you went from the Philippines then to Milan, Italy.

NICHOLS: That's correct. That was sort of a result of an inspection. I remember the inspector coming through the Philippines and recommending that “Mrs. Nichols ought to be shown some of the better side of Foreign Service life” after serving in a one-man post in the Philippines. So when I got back to Washington, there was an effort to transfer us to a European post. That's how I eventually ended up in Milan.

Q: In the meantime, a parenthetical question. Your employer had become the independent agency USIA.

NICHOLS: Yes, after I left the Philippines in 1954, early '54, as I remember, or '53. Was it the end of '53? I can't remember.

Q: The ending of '53.

NICHOLS: So I was then a member of the United States . . .

Q: Did this make any difference?

NICHOLS: It didn't seem to, except when I came back to Washington, I served a couple of months in the Agency at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue in the area office, I sat on the Indonesian desk while a colleague who had been in Indonesia sat on the Philippine desk. It didn't seem to make much difference, I mean, where you'd served. I filled in temporarily until I went to Milan.

TRANSFER TO MILAN

Q: Sophisticated and bustling Milan, Italy, was a far cry from your one-man post in the Philippines.

NICHOLS: It sure was. It was a very different experience. It was a four-American staff post, and I went there as the information officer. It was a completely new experience,

different than being in the Philippines, certainly. One of the first things I had to do was contend with another language, Italian.

Q: Had you known any Italian before?

NICHOLS: I had two weeks' training in Washington. That's all they gave you at that time. I arrived in Genoa by boat, drove my car from Genoa to Milan, and had to find a place to stay. I got a good introduction that way. I worked with a staff in Milan, where the meetings and everything were conducted in Italian. The PAO was Marjorie Ferguson, who always conducted her staff meetings in Italian. So I had to learn the hard way.

I commuted when I was in Italy. I lived in Como, and I commuted to Milan by train, which was a marvelous place to have my daily Italian lesson.

Q: The type of staff in Milan was quite different from what you had been accustomed in the boondocks in the Philippines?

NICHOLS: Very much so, although I had a couple of very well-educated staff members in the Philippines. But in Milan, I had people with doctorates running sections, the press section, and what we called the social-economic section. A man named Arturo Bassi, who was a very impressive individual. Then there was Giovanni Pini, another impressive individual, the former editor of the leading socialist daily paper in Italy. So this was a new experience, and I was still pretty wet behind the ears.

Q: Who was ambassador at the time?

NICHOLS: Mrs. Luce. Clare Boothe Luce was ambassador. She was a person who made an impression on everyone, the Italians, her staff and all of us, no question about it.

Q: Did you get acquainted with the opera at La Scala nearby?

NICHOLS: Yes, and one of my great memories is going to see “Porgy ad Bess” there, with the first American company that had ever played at La Scala. La Scala was making an exception. This was the same American company that had traveled to the Soviet Union, and was a very talent-rich group because it had three Porgies and three Besses. Mrs. Ira Gershwin was traveling with them, and Rubin Mamoulian was the director/producer. Gloria Davy was the lead Bess. She later ended up at the Met. Mrs. Luce came to Milan for opening night, escorted by our cultural attach#, the former dean of liberal arts at Howard University, Frank Snowden. Frank is a handsome black man, and very distinguished-looking, while Mrs. Luce, with her blond hair and good looks . . . They sat in the “royal” box in the center of the theater. ~My wife and I were sitting just in back of them. Everybody in that theater looked at them that night.

Q: That must have made quite an impression.

NICHOLS: It certainly did.

Q: After Milan, two years in Italy, and then on to Amsterdam, wasn't it?

ON TO AMSTERDAM: AND LYNDON JOHNSON CLOSES THE POST

NICHOLS: On to Amsterdam, again a one-man post, as branch public affairs officer. It wasn't a one-man post, because there was a consulate there, a consulate general. It was a one-man USIS post. But I closed Amsterdam in 1957. This was during one of the budget cutbacks. Majority Leader Johnson of the Senate was making some cosmetic cuts, and one of these was Amsterdam. It was cosmetic because the Amsterdam operation only cost $15,000 a year, exclusive of my salary. It certainly didn't make any difference in the overall budget. But it abolishing a post.

SO, NEXT, THE HAGUE

Things moved slowly in those days. I was trying desperately to get back to Washington because they'd just decided on opening up Chinese language training again after several years' hiatus. I applied for it. But I sat in a closed post in Amsterdam for two months with no job, waiting for a transfer, and then finally I was transferred to The Hague, 50 miles away, as the information officer.

Q: And the capital then. It was the only other post in Holland?

NICHOLS: Yes, that's true. It was the only post left in Holland.

Q: So did you start learning Chinese at that time or was that later?

AND THEN: WASHINGTON - OFFICE OF PRIVATE COOPERATION

NICHOLS: That came later. After I finished my tour in The Netherlands, I was returned to Washington, but still didn't get my Chinese language training. I was assigned to the Office of Private Cooperation run by a man named Conger Reynolds, assisted by John Begg. This office was an outgrowth of President Eisenhower's People to People Program. You were called a program executive, and they gave you certain committees of American citizens to work with. I was assigned to the hotel committee, the magazine committee, and the book committee. My job was to work with those committees of private citizens and develop programs that got the American people involved with our information programs abroad.

Q: This was a temporary type of assignment while you were waiting for the Chinese program?

NICHOLS: It was a regular assignment, but I was working behind the scenes to get into the Chinese language program. Interestingly enough, the man that helped me lives here on the Cape, another former staff member of USIA, Roy Benoit. He headed the language training program.

ASSIGNMENT TO LONG-SOUGHT-AFTER CHINESE LANGUAGE TRAINING

Q: When did the Chinese language assignment come through?

NICHOLS: One year after I got back to Washington. My office finally released me. I went into Chinese language training in the fall of 1959.

Q: This was right after mainland China had been taken over by Mao Zedong and company, right?

NICHOLS: Ten years after.

Q: But we were still without relationships with mainland China.

NICHOLS: Yes. There was no relationship. The only posts where Chinese language officers were being used were in Taiwan, then called the Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, where Chinese is spoken. They would also assign Chinese language officers to places like Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Saigon, where there was a Chinese population and some possibility to utilize your training.

Q: So there were not very many of you in Chinese language training?

NICHOLS: I was in the second class, I think, of Agency officers. We started out in FSI in Washington, and did six, seven, eight months there. Then provided you were doing well enough, you were sent on to Taichung out in Taiwan to complete your training. At the time, I had three classmates from USIA, Howard Stingle, Norman Barnes, and Mervin Hayworth. The others were from the State Department and CIA.

Q: What were your expectations at the time, if you can recall, about how you were going to use this language ability? Did you ever envision getting into "Red China?"

NICHOLS: Oh, I had hoped so, of course. There wasn't a one of us that was in Chinese language training that didn't have that goal in mind. I think it motivated most everyone, this desire to go and serve in China. We felt sure that eventually we would be there. That was very true.

Q: In fact, how did this develop in your case? You went to a Chinese-speaking post next?

HONG KONG - CULTURAL AFFAIRS OFFICER: EXPERIENCES WITH VISITING AMERICAN ARTISTS

NICHOLS: I followed my two-plus years of Chinese language training with an assignment in Hong Kong as cultural affairs officer, which, unfortunately, is not the best place to use Mandarin Chinese, because most of the Chinese in Hong Kong speak Cantonese. However, I did get to use it, and of course, it was definitely a Chinese environment and Chinese post in many respects. I was dealing with a Chinese audience there, by and large.

It was a very interesting assignment for other reasons. It was interesting because it taught me a lot about exchange programs, being a cultural affairs officer, and I was working with the type of programs I believed in—exchanges, libraries, book translation, speakers, etc.

Q: Hong Kong is the kind of place where a lot of Americans come to visit. You must have had a lot of American officialdom.

NICHOLS: Every American wants to stop in Hong Kong. The entertainers were there in droves. “Satchmo” was there, Sinatra was there. He was moving or trying hard to move in Kennedy circles, so he came there to do good things for them, charity balls and the like. We made good use of people like Sinatra and Gary Moore, but more especially of Rod Serling and Kirk Douglas who came out under our auspices. Serling—that was an interesting experience.

I was in charge of the book translation program while we were in Hong Kong. One of the plays that had been translated into Chinese was Thornton Wilder's “Our Town.” I was reminded of this recently, when I read recently about Arthur Miller's “Death of a Salesman” being done in China. Also I think that Charlton Heston was over there directing some American play in Chinese.

Well, we were offered Rod Serling as an American specialist to come to Hong Kong. What are we going to do with a Rod Serling, a “Twilight Zone” man? A very interesting person, but what are we going to do with him? Well, we had this play that had just been translated, “Our Town,” and we had a college in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist College, that wanted to put on this play. There was a young Chinese who had been on a Fulbright to the United States and had gone to the Yale School of Drama. He was back teaching at Baptist College. So I talked with him about it. I said, “Rod Serling's coming out. Is there any way you could use him in the development of the production of this play?”

He said, “Oh, my God, that would be marvelous.” He could help explain the meaning of the play and the significance of it. He could help direct.

So when Serling came, the city got very excited about this, and Serling spent his time in Hong Kong helping direct “Our Town” in Chinese. Of course, he had to work through the Chinese Yale graduate, but what he did was get across Wilder's meanings and intentions. The thing that came across so beautifully and to which the Chinese related was the use of mime in the play. There's so much of that in “Our Town.” Of course, the Chinese use mime a great deal, too. This worked out very well, and it played to huge audiences in Hong Kong, and it was a very great success.

Q: This was in the early Sixties?

NICHOLS: That would be 1964, somewhere around then.

Q: After your Hong Kong assignment, what?

NICHOLS: It was time for a tour in Washington, because I had never done a full tour in Washington. I was assigned to the East Asia area as a desk officer for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. My duties also included liaison with CU in State.

If I can for a minute, I'd like to go back to Hong Kong to a couple of things that happened in Hong Kong. One was that a Chinese university was established during my stay there, and as I said, I enjoyed the stay in Hong Kong because I learned a lot about exchange programs. We were able to establish a program with the University of California and the Chinese University, an exchange program of professors and students, undergraduate, graduate students, and professors going both ways each year. The Chinese University was a brand-new university in Hong Kong. It came from the consolidation of three private colleges, all of which were actually the successor colleges to those types that had existed pre-1949 in China. A Christian college, a private college and the national university (government funded).

These colleges had been established in Hong Kong after 1949, but were recognized by the British only as “post-secondary schools.” However, in 1963 they were amalgamated as one Chinese University, with Chinese the language of instruction. The first vice chancellor came from Berkeley, a man named Li Choh-ming, a very well-known Chinese-American educator.

Q: Which Chinese language?

NICHOLS: They used both Cantonese and Mandarin at the university. Mandarin, of course, is the national language of China, and it was also the national language of the then-Republic of China (Taiwan), and remains still the language that is taught in the schools in both places. Cantonese is not really taught, but it is the first language of the majority of Hong Kong people.

NIXON VISIT TO HONG KONG

Another thing that happened when I was in Hong Kong which had some significance was my first experience with “handling” somebody of historic importance. Mr. Nixon came to Hong Kong in the fall of 1965. He was attached to a law firm, but everybody believed he was probably working to run again for President.

Q: He had lost the governorship of California and was a few years ahead of his election as President.

NICHOLS: He was the lawyer for Pepsi-Cola, I believe. Cables announcing his visit came into the consulate general in Hong Kong. When he was vice president, he had been in Hong Kong, and somebody had persuaded him to endow a library with some books and perhaps some money. It had become known as the Nixon Library. On this trip to Hong Kong, the consulate general wasn't too anxious to handle Mr. Nixon. He was not in public office. They didn't know what to do with him, but they knew they couldn't ignore him.

So the consul general said, “We've got an out. The Nixon Library and the cultural officer, they make a pair.” Well, Bob Nichols was made the control officer for Richard Nixon when he was in Hong Kong. Of course, Nixon got a lot of attention, press attention and so forth. I was sent down to brief him on the local situation.

I remember the consul general called me in early in the morning and said, “For God's sake, Bob, make sure he understands what's going on, the problems in Hong Kong we have on Vietnam and with Peking.” He was referring to the fact that Peking was accusing the United States of using Hong Kong as a base for its Vietnam operations. Of course, it was an R & R place for the U.S. Navy, and also the Army. The fleet was visiting all the time, and soldiers were flying in from Saigon daily.

Just prior to Nixon's arrival, one of the R & R planes had crashed at the end of the runway at Kaitak Airport in Hong Kong. Everybody on board was killed. It was a headline story and

also drew attention to the fact that Hong Kong was being used by the U.S. military to send its troops from Vietnam. I was to make sure that Mr. Nixon understood the sensitivities on this score, and that when he met the press, to be aware of the problem. Of course, I had heard all these things about how Nixon didn't like the press, and I knew I was going to have to run a press conference for him.

I spent a day and a half with him, and the second day we went out to the Nixon Library. He asked a lot of questions. It was just Nixon and myself in the car, along with a congressman from California named Pat Hillings.

Q: What were your impressions of Nixon the man at that time?

NICHOLS: My impressions of Nixon prior to his arrival were very negative. My impressions of Nixon the man, based on this experience, were quite positive. He had a tremendous intellectual curiosity. He wasn't telling me anything but rather was picking my brain for everything and anything I could tell him about China and about the attitude of the people in Hong Kong towards China, and the attitude of the Chinese towards Hong Kong. He never stopped asking questions, one after another, which was quite impressive, I thought, as an insignificant cultural affairs officer in Hong Kong, what an experience to have a man who had been vice president of the United States and had run for President and was to run again, asking me these questions and paying attention to what I had to say.

Then I warned him about the press. I told him that the American correspondents would try to take over and dominate the press conference, that the Chinese were very passive, and that it would be a good idea if he paid attention to the Chinese questions. And by gosh, he did. He took extra time. In fact, he delayed his departure from Hong Kong on an Air France plane. They had to hold the plane—he was going to Saigon—because he held a press conference longer, mainly because he was letting the Chinese get their questions in. That was a real teaching experience to me.

Q: You mentioned Vietnam in this context. At that point it was quiescent. The French had left several years earlier, and we were not really involved.

NICHOLS: We were getting quite involved by '65, yes. It was after the Tonkin Gulf.

Q: This is after the death of President Kennedy and during the Johnson Administration.

NICHOLS: This is during the Johnson Administration. The Tonkin Gulf resolution had already been passed.

Q: So it was on the front burner.

NICHOLS: It was on the front burner, yes.

Q: Did you have any other intimations during that posting of what was to come in Vietnam?

NICHOLS: You had a pretty strong feeling about what was going on, because it was the R & R people, not only the military servicemen, but also our people posted there. The USIS people and State Department people would come into Hong Kong, and many of the wives were living in Hong Kong while husbands were in Vietnam. So we were getting a good dose of information about what was going on in the country, and it was obviously a much bigger thing than we ever expected. It was a very worrisome thing. It was really front burner in our minds out there, day in and day out. You could not forget that Vietnam was right around the corner from Hong Kong.

WASHINGTON AGAIN; AUSTRALIA/NEW ZEALAND DESK OFFICER, THEN VOA AS CHIEF OF CHINESE BRANCH

Q: You went, the next year or so, to the Voice of America, and then concentrated on Chinese relationships at that time. That's all part of the same fabric, I suppose.

NICHOLS: I was only the area officer for Australia and New Zealand, etc., for about six months when I was asked to succeed Jerry Stryker at the Voice of America as chief of the Chinese branch. That was quite an experience. A very interesting experience, and an intimidating experience, too, for me, in the beginning, because succeeding Jerry Stryker, who was probably the best Chinese language officer the U.S. Information Agency has ever had, was intimidating. Jerry recommended me, and I don't think it was based on my Chinese; it was just because Jerry had worked with me and felt that I could do the job. But to go in there and be in charge, and know that you're in charge of Chinese language broadcasts, boy, it worried me.

Q: VOA had a pretty heavy schedule of Chinese language broadcasts at the time?

NICHOLS: Oh, yes, very heavy. It was eight hours a day. Some of those were repeats. I think we had three and a half, four hours of original broadcasts, but that's a lot of air time.

Q: What was on those programs?

NICHOLS: News and features. We did a lot with news and features, and we had a big staff. I've forgotten how large the staff was. It's still large. But it was 25, 30, 40 people, up to 40 people at a time, including contract people. Some of them were strictly announcer types, news readers, and then there was the writing staff who wrote features, some of which were original features, some of which were based on translated material that was used for the back half of the programs. The front half of the program was always news and commentary. Then there was music, also, but most was news and commentary.

Q: Since the United States had no formal relations with mainland China, to what extent was the VOA used as a channel for messages one way or another? SUBTLE CHANGE IN TERMINOLOGY ON VIA BROADCASTS TO MAINLAND CHINA: ITS EFFECT

NICHOLS: A very interesting thing happened while I was there in 1968. I had absolutely no idea that anything was going on at that time regarding a change in our relationship

with China, but I was very disturbed because we, as a communications agency, and the Voice of America was a tool of communications, a major medium for our message, and that our main—to use the word—target audience was the people in China, not the people in Taiwan. I was disturbed that we were using language in Chinese that was offensive to the people in China.

Q: Why?

NICHOLS: Because it was our policy to do that. Our policy at the time required that we call them Communist China, not the People's Republic of China. We had to call them Zhonggong, and that means Chinese Communists. We didn't call it Beijing; we called it Peiping, which was the nationalist name for Peking, which means “northern peace.” Beijing means “northern capital.” You see, the nationalists never had their capital in Peking; they had it in Nanking and Chungking. So we couldn't call it that. And there was other terminology that we could not use. We had to use the language that Taiwan used in describing the government in China.

Well, I wrote a memo to the State Department about this, and I made my feelings known. I said, “Look, we're trying to communicate with people. If we're not going to have them turn off right at the beginning of our broadcast, then we better start using language that they accept.” This went over to the PRC desk in State. It wasn't called the PRC desk, the People's Republic desk, in those days; it was called the Communist China desk, the deputy director of which was an old colleague of mine, Dick Donald, who has now passed away. Dick had worked with me in Hong Kong. He said, “I like your memo. This is good. I'm going to pass it on up.”

Well, it went up to Bill Bundy, who was then the assistant secretary. By gosh, in a week, I got approval to use the proper terms on our broadcast, except when I was directly quoting Secretary Rusk, who always said “Communist China” and always said “Peiping.”

But otherwise, unless I was directly quoting an American official, I could use the proper terminology.

Q: A kind of turning point, then. To what extent did the State Department pay attention to the Chinese broadcasts, use them, control them, be concerned about them?

NICHOLS: They were concerned about them. They didn't control them. They would look over some of the commentaries we were putting out. I worked with them quite closely, because I had a lot of colleagues in State with whom I had gone through Chinese language training.

There was a panel at that time, an advisory panel on China for the State Department, which drew on academics from all over the country, people like John Fairbanks, Bob Scalapino, and Doak Barnett, people who would come for a session once every two or three months. I'd sit in on these as the director of Voice broadcasts to China. The talk was about all aspects of U.S. policy towards China and what should be changed.

There was little doubt that the feeling in the Department of State then at the levels below the very top was that we should be moving in the direction of rapprochement with Peking.

To finish up this story about the Voice of America—I've always wondered, as I read later, and later when I served in Taiwan and when I read about the signals that were given to China that we were moving away from our hard stance, whether or not we didn't use that change in language as one of our signals. I've never talked with anyone at State about this, really, because Dick Donald died, and I never had a chance to talk to Bill Bundy about it, and I've never seen it mentioned in the memoirs that I've read. But I have talked about it to Chinese in China who listened to the Voice of America.

Q: You make your annual trips even these days to China, so you are well in touch there.

NICHOLS: Yes. I ran into two people that told me they were listening to VOA then. They heard this difference in language and to the Chinese it was very significant, and people talked about it. In other words, the Chinese caught this change in language. To me it made everything seem worthwhile. Whether or not they were telling me the truth, it sounded sincere, anyhow, so I think it probably was used as one of the early signals.

The signals to China began to flow in the next two years, when I was in Taiwan.

Q: This is an interesting focus on the total apparatus of the U.S. Government utilizing all the tools it has at its command for foreign affairs purposes. One wonders whether the top echelon policy makers—Bundy, Rusk, and higher—were aware of this signal and what it might have meant to the Chinese at the time.

NICHOLS: I have to think that certainly Bundy knew. I mean, Bundy had to approve it. He had approved the change in language. I wasn't allowed to do it without his approval, so I'm sure he did. Now, whether this went up to Secretary Rusk, whether it went that far . . . See, this was prior to Kissinger. Most of the signals came in the next administration. The other signals have all been written up in memoirs. This development came prior to that.

Q: You might have been, you're saying, softening up your Chinese audience with this idea by this change in language.

NICHOLS: I think the whole idea in communications—you just can't communicate with people unless you use language that they will accept. I mean, it's such a basic principle, that maybe it was accepted on that basis. Somebody saw the logic of this and accepted it for that reason.

Q: We're now at 1965 or thereabouts, '66, then '68. After Voice of America, what came next?

ARMY WAR COLLEGE (1 YEAR), THEN DEPUTY PAO, TAIWAN

NICHOLS: I went to the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for a year.

Q: A year off?

NICHOLS: Yes, it was a year off. In effect, it was a year off. It was a very interesting year. I guess what it taught me more about than anything was that we have some very fine minds amongst our military. It was a good sort of cross-fertilization. It helped me work with the military later on. I did some interesting research on China while I was there, for my paper, and it was a good year.

Q: Then back to active duty as what?

NICHOLS: Then I went out to Taiwan as deputy PAO in '69.

Q: Had you been in Taiwan before?

NICHOLS: In language school. I'd spent two years there in language school, so I was going back to a place I knew. I went out as deputy PAO. When I arrived, the PAO was Ken Boyle, but soon thereafter he was replaced by Bob Clarke, who passed away a few years ago.

Q: So the changing nature of the Chinese-American relationship must have been one of your top focuses.

NICHOLS: When I went out there, it wasn't apparent that it was going to be. You see, I went out there just after the change in administration. The Nixon Administration had just come in. I was aware of the Nixon Foreign Affairs article on China, written prior to his being elected, in which he said the U.S. can't afford not to have relation with the most populous country in the world, a quarter of the world's population. So it was obvious Mr. Nixon felt that something should change, and Mr. Kissinger made it known, too.

USIS'S CAUTIOUS MOVE TO SUGGEST TO TAIWAN THAT U.S. ATTITUDE TOWARD MAINLAND CHINA WAS SHIFTING

But very soon we began to see subtle changes taking place. Kissinger would have off-the-record briefings for the press that used to come to us as “limited official use.” They'd be given out by the press quoting a highly placed official of the administration. Well, from the things that were being said by Kissinger, you could see where we were going.

Bob Clarke and I decided that what we needed to do was prepare our audience in Taiwan for what apparently was coming. Of course, we didn't know exactly what was coming. We had as much difficulty persuading the embassy, I think, to go along with our ideas, as we had in persuading the Taiwanese, the people on Taiwan, of what we were saying was happening. We gave monthly press briefings to the Chinese press, and when we had the right visitor, we'd draw on that person. I gave one on the Nixon doctrine. All these were beginnings, an attempt to show that U.S. foreign policy was moving away from its hard position, and that a d#tente was in the works.

Q: That must have generated tremendous pressures by the Nationalist Chinese in Taiwan against the American official establishment.

NICHOLS: There was certainly a great deal, and some of it was manifested in rather unpleasant ways. In Taiwan, we had branch offices down-island in Taichung, in Tainan, and in Kaohsiung. In 1970 I was visiting our office in Kaohsiung when we got a telephone call from Tainan, 30 miles from Kaohsiung. We were sitting down to dinner at the branch PAO's house, when a call came in that a bomb had just blown up the USIS Tainan office. So we went to Tainan. The office had been almost completely destroyed, and several people had been seriously hurt. This happened the day after Double Tenth, the Republic of China's National Day (Double Ten, October 10.) It also happened at a time when the United States had just given asylum or had helped, supposedly, in the escape from Taiwan of a Taiwan nationalist, a man named Peng Ming-min.

The Chinese government was not happy with us, and hose strong supporters of this Nationalist regime were not happy with us. Who placed the bomb was never officially acknowledged, but there were very strong suspicions about the source.

DIFFERENCE OF OPINION: USIS - EMBASSY

This was a time on Taiwan when, again, things like language in our press releases became important. The same thing I'd had with the Voice. I remember going to the embassy once to get approval for some language for the press from the deputy chief of mission. I said, “This is what we want to use.”

He said, “You can't say that.”

I said, “That's a direct quote from Kissinger's press briefing.”

And he said, “Kissinger doesn't make U.S. foreign policy.” [Well, at that time, of course, Kissinger headed the National Security Council; he wasn't Secretary then.]

I looked at him. I didn't say anything, but I looked at him and thought, “Boy, there's a lack of realism here in the embassy, as well.” There really was. There was a tremendous amount of resistance. They couldn't believe what was happening.

Another thing that happened, just before I left Taiwan to go to Singapore—well, a lot of things happened while we were in Taiwan, actually. I should mention this was a time when we withdrew the Seventh Fleet from the Taiwan Straits. It was announced by Vice President Agnew when he was out there on one of the two trips he made while I was there. Agnew brought the news to Chiang Kai-shek that we were taking the Seventh Fleet out of the Taiwan Straits.

Q: Chiang, the old Chinese Nationalist leader, was still in power then?

NICHOLS: Oh, yes, he didn't die until 1975. He was there and his presence was known. A lot of the work of the administration had been taken over by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, but Chiang Kai-shek was still in power. He dealt with Vice President Agnew.

INTERESTING DEVELOPMENTS JUST AS NICHOLS IS LEAVING FOR NEW POST - SINGAPORE

Q: Maybe we can jump ahead a little bit. We're talking about relations between U.S.A. and China. Where were you when the renewal of relationship was announced and became public knowledge?

NICHOLS: The renewal, first of all, the Kissinger trip. He arrived in Beijing the day I left Taiwan on transfer to Singapore. I didn't know it. This is a little story that's interesting, because just a week prior to this, my successor had arrived in Taiwan, and I took him down-island over the Fourth of July. This was '69. We visited the branch posts and missed the Fourth of July party in Taipei. When we returned, there was sort of a flap because the ambassador was concerned about the lack of any news in the papers about the Fourth of July party. Well, there had been some in the Chinese papers, but he only read the English language press, the China News.

The day that I was making my farewell call and introducing my successor in the ambassador's office, he said, “Bob, can't we do something about getting something favorable in the press?” He'd just returned from a trip to Washington. He said, “Do the Chinese know I saw the President?”

I said, “Mr. Ambassador, we didn't know that you'd seen the President.”

He said, “Just a minute.~” He went over to his briefcase and pulled out a photo, a large photo, and he handed it to me. He said, “Can we do something with this?” It was a photo

of President Nixon and himself (Ambassador Walter McConaughy) sitting in the Oval Office, opposite each other, staring with a blank look on each face.

I looked at that picture and said, “But sir, what would be the caption?” He said, “Okay, okay,” and put it away. He felt I didn't like the idea. It wasn't the kind of picture that would have given the people on Taiwan any particular feeling of reassurance. I don't think that he was even told what was going on at that time. The President didn't know what to say to him, and he didn't know what to say to the President.

Q: And it showed on their faces.

NICHOLS: A week later, Kissinger was in Beijing. So no question, the President knew that Kissinger was going to make this trip to China when he saw the Ambassador. I saw the news when I stopped in Penang with my wife en route to Singapore.

Q: So you did not have to face the Nationalist Chinese in Taiwan.

NICHOLS: No, I left and several newspapermen saw us off at the airport. I wasn't there when it happened. I was on vacation.

Q: They must have been horrified and angered.

NICHOLS: Oh, I'm sure they were. I know they were, yes, definitely. But we had prepared them for something like this coming.

Q: We were talking about the moment when you were in Taiwan, when the Kissinger trip became known, and some of your other recollections of that post.

NICHOLS: I have one strong recollection of the post. I was talking a minute ago about Kissinger's influence and the direction we were taking in China, and how poorly people in the administration understood exactly what his position was. Near the end of my tour, just

before I left Taiwan in June 1971, Frank Shakespeare, director of the Agency at the time, and the area director, John Reinhardt, arrived in Taipei.

I've mentioned that we'd had these monthly briefings for the press on U.S. policy. Well, Bob Clarke, the PAO, said, “We got Frank Shakespeare here, let's use Frank Shakespeare and let him talk to the Chinese press, and maybe he can give them something special, and maybe he can reassure them a little bit.” The Ambassador thought this was a good idea. No American officials had been visiting Taiwan and you could sense Taiwan was becoming a pariah of some sort. Frank Shakespeare was the first American official of any significance to come to Taiwan for some time, so we thought we'd use him.

On the day he arrived with John Reinhardt, Bob Clarke and I presented him with this idea, and he liked the idea, but he said, “I've got to get approval.” Bob Clarke held a reception at his house that night for Shakespeare to meet the Chinese staff. While we were there, Shakespeare drafted a cable to Washington to present what we wanted to do, and to see if there were any objections to his doing this. We were at Bob's house. He said, “How can I get this cable off?”

I said, “We can get it down to the embassy and the duty officer will get it out.” We were at Bob's house. The USIS secretary was Dotty Fry. Dotty and I went into Bob's bedroom, where there was a typewriter. I read it over, and Dotty typed it up. I looked at the addressees and neither State nor USIA were included. So I added them. I thought it was just an oversight. I took the typed version to John Reinhardt. John looked at it, and took it over to Frank Shakespeare.

The next thing I knew, Frank Shakespeare came over to me and led me down a corridor. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, “Bob, I know you're a good bureaucrat.” (Laughs) “You've made those changes in the cable addressees, but I have to tell you, I don't want this to go to the State and Agency. I only want it to go to the White House, to Kissinger.” I got the message, and learned a valuable lesson. I mean, here was

the Director of the U.S. Information Agency, but he was operating only with Kissinger and the White House, ignoring the Department of State and his own Agency.

Of course, the reply came back and he was told not to meet with the press. So we never had the Shakespeare briefing. He was not granted permission. I have always felt that to be a revealing anecdote.

Q: That was the nature of Frank. He was more interested in...

NICHOLS: It was also the nature of Kissinger on China policy. That's where all the decisions were made, strictly in the White House with Kissinger.

Q: Yes. From Taiwan, then, you mentioned you had gone to Singapore and had your own post at PAO.

SINGAPORE, AS PAO

NICHOLS: Yes. I finally got my own post in Singapore, 20 years after coming into the Foreign Service. It seemed like a long wait, but it was worth it. It was an ideal time, you know. For years in the Agency, how we all suffered with the lack of funding flexibility. You couldn't move your funds around, but rather funds were locked into whatever was designated in your budget. I think one of the greatest things that ever happened to the Agency was Henry Loomis' decision to start the resource management system. It was initiated when I was in Taiwan, and we learned to use it there. You could do all sorts of creative things with it.

When I got to Singapore, I thought Singapore was terrific, because if ever there was a post that needed a lot of changes, at least as far as I was concerned, it was the USIS, Singapore. It was sort of steeped in the past; nothing had been changed in 25 years. Now with the RMS system, you could make changes and get all the support in the world.

Q: Did the change in China policy make a big impact in that regard?

NICHOLS: No. In Singapore, no. Actually, it was not related to the changes I wanted to make. When I got to Singapore, I didn't even think about China. I thought about what I could do with things like the library. The library was filled with students from a nearby school who came in to get into air-conditioning to do their homework. They weren't even using our books. That sort of thing completely turned me off. I wanted to make changes.

This was also the time of Allen Carter's Infomat in Japan. I thought all these concepts were interesting. I visited Japan wanted to see what Infomat was like. I had my own ideas, and I saw some good things happening in Japan, but I also felt there were a lot of things that just didn't apply or weren't good ideas for Singapore. But anyhow, I had a chance to do some things with Singapore and establish what was, I guess, the first “resource center” in the Agency. There is nothing very original about a “resource center” as such, but it was the first one in USIS. The Agency took on the name for various libraries elsewhere later on and some were modeled closely on the one in Singapore.

Q: Singapore must have been another kind of listening post, a visiting station for many prominent Americans. Did you have a flow of visitors?

NICHOLS: Yes, it was, but most of the good people we had coming through there were a result of the Star system. Remember the Star system? Ambassador Pat Moynihan of India initiated the Star system. What he did was get a lot of people that he knew, friends, into the AMSPEC program. Some of these people we got, and we could make selections under the resource management system of those we wanted. So we did get good people, some very interesting people during that period. Bucky Fuller—I can remember having Buckminster Fuller there and having top Singaporeans all sitting on the floor listening to him.

Q: He was known as innovative.

NICHOLS: Absolutely, full of fascinating ideas. Singaporean sitting around at his feet, literally at his feet. Then we had people like Edward Teller and Norman Podhoretz, who represented something else. For neo-conservative thinking, we had Norman Podhoretz. And, of course, Edward Teller, that was my first exposure to him, and an interesting exposure, I must say. He got a lot of attention there. Whether we wanted it or not, we did get a lot of the people talking about U.S. policy in Vietnam, academic types, by and large, but people that were supportive. Singapore basically backed the United States on Vietnam. It was not a place where you really tried to push this, and I didn't try to emphasize it. I was trying to emphasize other things.

Q: What were the principal concerns of those leaders of Singapore about the United States in those years?

NICHOLS: That's a good question for me because of what I was concerned with in setting up our program there. In restructuring the library, I didn't think we should go with an oral sort of library, appealing to and open to everyone. I wanted a library that would appeal to certain individuals and groups in Singapore. I wanted to build a library based on the concurrence of interests, where our U.S. interests coincided with those of the Singaporeans. So that's why we built the resource center. We emphasized those areas and developed a specialized library. In other words, it concentrated on those areas and ideas which were of special interest to Singaporeans. So we had large collections in areas of business and education, and American foreign policy was heavily emphasized. Also there was a big section on economics.

Q: Not much concern about the big China question, then?

NICHOLS: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely. We had a section in the library on China itself. Singapore's population is about 75% ethnic Chinese, so there was an interest, although the Singapore government did not recognize the People's Republic of China. It still doesn't today, as a matter of fact. It says it never will until Indonesia does. Singapore does not

recognize it, despite government control being largely in the hands of ethnic Chinese. The prime minister is Chinese. One of the biggest concerns in Singapore was fear of racial strife, concern about integrating a society which was composed of several racial groups, Malays, Indians, and Chinese. Therefore they didn't want undue influence from Peking, which they felt would subvert the ethnic Chinese population.

Q: Different conflicts. What was happening in the United States at the time? You were there from '71 to '74, which is the time of the change of administration, Watergate, and all that. How much impact did that make there?

NICHOLS: It had its impact, but the Singaporeans, first of all, just couldn't understand Watergate, I think like many countries. They just couldn't understand why we were so concerned about it. I couldn't believe it. I had a very hard time believing it myself. I couldn't believe a President of the United States would do these things and lie about them. I remember when I finally began to believe it was all true was when a person who certainly was a part of that administration, our area director for Asia, Kent Crane, paid a visit. He was staying at our house. We were having breakfast, and Kent saw the morning papers. There was some terrible story about what was going on in the White House. He said, “It's true. There's no question about it. That's exactly what's going on.” It was some question about Erlichman, Haldeman, this and that. I've forgotten the story.

Q: Kent Crane, as I recall, was brought in by the administration.

NICHOLS: Absolutely. Kent Crane was Agnew's foreign affairs advisor. When Agnew made his first trip to Taiwan around New Year's 1969-70, Kent Crane was along as his foreign affairs advisor. That's when I first met Kent Crane. Little did I know he was going to become my boss a couple of years later. When he moved from the Vice President's office to the Agency. I think he saw the handwriting on the wall. Knowing Crane, I am sure he saw the handwriting on the wall over at the White House, and he wanted out, and someplace else.

Q: When he sort of nodded his head and said, “That's the way it is,” he had seen it.

NICHOLS: Oh, yes, he'd seen it. I was almost sure. After hearing him, I began to believe it myself. It was a very disturbing thing. I left Singapore, as a matter of fact, on the day that the President resigned. It was also Singapore's National Day, so you don't forget that. That was the day I finally left Singapore.

Q: You never were assigned to China?

MISSING ASSIGNMENT TO CHINA - BACK TO WASHINGTON

NICHOLS: No, but in 1973, when the Liaison Office was established in China—after the Shanghai communique in 1972 and the Nixon visit, the Liaison Office (now the embassy) in Beijing was set up—I was told by Washington, Ken Crane wrote to me—I still have the letter—that, “You're our candidate for PAO China.”

Q: There must have been relatively few officers who knew China and Chinese language.

NICHOLS: There were. It was great. I was hoping I was going to Beijing. But the State Department didn't want USIA in Beijing, because they didn't want the Chinese to have a reciprocal organization in the United States. They didn't want anything but State in there in 1973, so that prevented the assignment of a USIS officer. Also, it was quite obvious that of the few tools that the Liaison Office had to work with in China, the most valuable was a USIS operation—the exchanges. They wanted to handle them themselves, and I can't blame them. They wanted to handle the exchanges because those allowed for contacts with the Chinese.

Q: That's all they had.

NICHOLS: That's all they had.

Q: So then you personally got involved in an exchange proposition in the Washington assignment?

ASSIGNED TO CULTURAL BUREAU - STATE DEPARTMENT: CHINESE EXCHANGES

NICHOLS: Yes, I was asked to go to CU as the deputy for East Asia, but with specific responsibilities for the exchanges with the People's Republic of China. Dave Hitchcock was director of CU EA, and I was his deputy.

The first thing I faced was a huge Chinese archeology exhibit that came to the United States as part of the exchange program. It opened at the National Gallery in Washington, then went on to Kansas City and San Francisco. We were working with members of the Chinese Liaison Office in Washington, and I worked particularly with their cultural attach#, Mr. Hsieh. I used to consider him the barometer of U.S.-China relations, depending on the warmth or lack of warmth with which he greeted me each time we met. This was a very difficult period in U.S.-China relations, because it had gone beyond the Shanghai communique and the opening of the Liaison Office. We didn't realize fully what was going on in China at the time; we didn't realize the intensity of the internal strife of the period of the “Gang of Four” in the last stages of the Cultural Revolution.

So the Liaison Office in Washington was affected by internal events in China tremendously. We had advised them that for an American audience it's best not to fill your catalog for the archeological exhibit full of polemic material, and to present things straightforwardly. Don't talk about slave and feudal societies. But they wouldn't accept our advice. Then when it came to the press conference to open the exhibit, the Chinese cultural attach# phoned me and said, “The Israeli, the South Korean, the South African and the Taiwan press representatives cannot attend or the exhibit won't open.”

We informally discussed the problem with the press representative from Taiwan, and they, fortunately and gracefully stepped aside, realizing there was a problem, and they'd

be better off if they didn't get themselves mixed up in it. But we couldn't give in on the other ones. Everybody was invited. It went out on the AP and UPI wires, there was a press conference, and all the press services in Washington who had representatives were invited. So the others came. I've forgotten, but there was some face-saving device employed, and the Chinese went along with it, and the exhibit opened as scheduled. But it was that sort of thing we constantly faced in that period.

Q: They were learning how to be worldwide diplomats, too, I suppose.

NICHOLS: Yes, they were. I always called it the “getting to know you” period for both sides. We hadn't worked with these people for 20 years, and it was a completely different set of ground rules. We were trying to understand what they had to deal with back in Peking, and they had to try to understand what we were dealing with in Washington. I mean, if you tried to talk about press freedoms to these people, in terms of these press conferences, it was difficult. On the other hand, we didn't really understand the pressures they were under in terms of the political turmoil in China. Anyhow, it was a very interesting period.

Q: You were working in those years, as well, the mid-Seventies we're talking about, in ICS, in English teaching and that kind of thing. You had something to do with the Vientiane, as I recall.

AEROFLOT TRIP - VIENTIANE TO RANGOON

NICHOLS: That was still when I was in CU. During one of the trips I made overseas, spring of '75, Saigon fell. I happened to be in Vientiane that day, and I was leaving there for Rangoon on a Russian Aeroflot plane. It came in from Hanoi, and so when I boarded this plane, I was completely surrounded by Russians and North Vietnamese. I was obviously the only American on the plane. They were all rather lighthearted. But for me that was the day Saigon had fallen and our people had been taken off the embassy roof by a helicopter. Here I was on this plane with all these Russians and North Vietnamese.

Aeroflot planes are never the nicest flights, even in the best of circumstances. I'm sure you know. They're not very hospitable or very warm in their reception anyhow, and the food is terrible. So after surrounded by these people, I was never so glad to get off a plane in my life. And then I was the only person that got off the plane in Rangoon. (Laughs)

When I got into the airport, there weren't any Burmese officials around. There was nobody there to stamp my passport. I had to hunt around for somebody in the airport to accept me into the country. The PAO who was meeting me, was not allowed inside the custom area; so until I got through that part, I never saw anyone. It was a pretty lonesome experience.

Q: That was the last plane out of Vientiane you were talking about. When you were in ICS, this was right after that, right, the CU assignment?

ESCORT OFFICER FOR CYRUS VANCE LEAD DELEGATION TRIP TO CHINA

NICHOLS: Yes. I should mention one other thing about the CU assignment, probably, which is important in terms of the China relationship. I was the escort officer for one of the major delegations that went to China during that period called the World Affairs Delegation. It was led by Cyrus Vance and included the heads of many big foundations in the United States, the Rockefeller Foundation, headed by Dr. John Knowles, the Carnegie Foundation, headed by Tom Hughes, Phil Talbot, the former ambassador to India, who headed the Asia Society, Carter Burgess of the Foreign Policy Association, etc. It was composed of that caliber of people, and was headed by Cyrus Vance. This was in 1975, before he became Secretary of State.

This was one of the early delegations to China, and it included 18 people altogether. We were received at the very highest level when we got to China. These delegations, both the Chinese delegations that came to the United States and the American delegations that went to China during this period of “getting to know you,” as I call it, between 1973 and '78, were very, very important in developing the relationship to a point where we could normalize it in '79. They established many, many contacts that have been followed up on

and continued since then.This delegation had some important people on it and it met with the most important Chinese. This was during the last stages of the Cultural Revolution in China, and we felt it while we were there, although we weren't always aware exactly why things were the way they were. We were in Beijing for a week, with the hopes that we were going to meet the top leaders, but they never let you know in advance. You had meetings with various officials, where a lot of questions were asked by us, but not answered by the Chinese officials. All these questions, it turned out, were accumulated and left to be answered by Deng Xiaoping, who evidently decided that the people in the delegation were worth meeting. So we got the message, first thing in the morning, ~"Everything else canceled. You're going to the Great Hall of the People to meet with Deng Xiaoping." [Deng at that time was in his second "come-back." Shortly after our visit, he was sent back to the countryside for "reform through labor" for a third time. We met with him in the Great Hall for an hour and 40 minutes.

By the way, George Bush was the ambassador at that time.

Q: Did he meet with you?

NICHOLS: He went with us. Oh, yes. That's another reason the State Department was very anxious to have the exchanges under their thumb. These were the benefits. George Bush didn't often get a chance to sit down with Deng Xiaoping. This was the only way he could get to do it. Q: I didn't mean to ask, "Where was George?"

NICHOLS: George was very much there, and it was an hour and 40 minutes. Although he sat over on one side with the rest of us. We were all in big overstuffed chairs, being served tea and expensive Chinese cigarettes. Up in front, Deng Xiaoping sat with Cy Vance on one side and the deputy leader of the delegation, Art Rosen, on the other. Art, by the way, at one time worked for the U.S. Information Agency as China desk officer. After his retirement from State, Art became president of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, which was the sponsoring U.S. agency for this particular

exchange. All exchanges with China were done through either one of two sponsoring agencies, the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations or the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China which handled most of the scientific-type exchanges.

Anyhow, Deng Xiaoping sat there, and as he talked he would punctuate his remarks by spitting into a spittoon, located at his toe between him and Cy Vance. Cy just sort of jerked his head back and looked, stunned.

Q: Was he chewing tobacco?

NICHOLS: No, he was smoking. He is a chain smoker. I don't know whether he did it for emphasis, or even intentionally, but it was certainly startling. This very interesting exchange of ideas lasted for an hour and 40 minutes. Discussion revolved around U.S.-China relations, and the questioning probed where the Chinese were headed in terms of their policy. Little did we realize how difficult this period was for Deng. He was exiled shortly thereafter, and soon after that there was the death of Zhou En-lai and then Mao Zedong.

Actually all the questions that the delegation had asked other officials during that week were answered one by one by Deng Xiaoping.

Q: It's an interesting example of how private diplomacy, such as with this group, Cy Vance and company, and public diplomacy together turns out to be the mainstream of real diplomacy, of substantive diplomacy.

NICHOLS: It was not a formal relationship. It wasn't government to government; it was people to people, Chinese people to American people. We had no relations with the Chinese Government, technically speaking, with the Liaison Office. The two countries had not normalized relations, so everything was a people-to-people relationship, and that's how it was carried on at that time. Q: You had a little bit of respite from Chinese concentration

during your ICS assignment in Washington in the mid-Seventies, and had a chance to travel to some other areas.

A NEW LOOK AT USIA WORK THROUGH ICS

NICHOLS: That was fun. In fact, I'm delighted that I had it. It was just a little over a year, and I was in charge of—I've forgotten what it was called in ICS, but it was the office that was involved with Binational Centers, library operations, information centers, and English teaching programs. It had supervised the regional librarians' work. It directed certain aspects of the Binational Center operations, and directed the English teaching operations. So it included a bunch of agency programs that I strongly believed in.

I'd never worked with a Binational Center in my life. The only one I'd ever been exposed to was the one in Bangkok, and then only as a visitor. BNCs didn't exist, by and large, in Asia. So I insisted, with Hal Sniedman and Cliff Southard: “By God, if you want me to run this office, let me go out and see some BNCs.” My first junket was to Latin America, your old stamping grounds. This was fascinating because the area was completely new to me in terms of the way programs were run, the approach and so forth. I met a new bunch of officers, most of whom I had never seen before.

Then later, I went to NEA. I went out to a PAO conference in Tunis, and from there to Iran, not too much prior to all the trouble. That was in 1976. I got a feeling for Iran, just being there for three or four days, after which I went on to Pakistan for another PAO conference, then to Israel. The trip gave me a good feel for some of the NEA posts.

Q: Let me ask you a question having to do with diversity of programming. What you've seen with your concentration of the Far East and your exposure to other areas, how universal should the Agency's message and the country's message be to peoples of the world? To what extent does it have to be tailored to audiences?

TAILORED MESSAGES VS. UNIVERSAL THEMES

NICHOLS: I'm a great believer in tailoring messages to audiences. I think there certainly are things that should be universal, but the way you do it certainly should be tailored to the audience. The tools you use can vary from post to post in country to country, and the way the messages are presented needs to be tailored to the culture in which you're working. This, my argument, became one side of a major debate in the Agency. When I left, it was still going on. I'm sure it still goes on today. There was a major effort for a while in the Agency, I felt, to homogenize everything the Agency did, you know, package everything for the world. I was much against this because I felt strongly that each place you work in is so different that you've got to take your messages and present them differently. You've got to allow the field to do that, to decide how they're going to present the message.

That's also why I felt it was vitally important that officers should know the language and culture of the area in which they're working. Otherwise you couldn't possibly understand how to present these messages and how to get these ideas across.

Q: There's much more emphasis on language and communication now than there was when you came into the Agency, obviously.

NICHOLS: Oh, yes. At the time I left, there was. I think while I was at the Agency we'd learned a lot of lessons. But I think we've unlearned a few from what I have read and heard recently. But we learned a lot of lessons starting way back from the time that I made that statement, “Nichols Vows To Make A Democracy Grow Stronger.” I'd certainly learned a lot of lessons, and I think the Agency as a whole had also; lessons about how to present ourselves to a foreign audience. Back in the Philippine days, we displayed exhibits that showed the American kitchen and all the modern appliances to people in the Philippines who had no hope of getting such things, which was just stupid. But that's the way we worked with information programs back a the beginning, because we didn't really understand what cross-culture communication was all about.

Q: We have learned a lot, and yet the pendulum continues to swing with various emphases from time to time. Your final assignment with the Agency started in 1977, and that was the time with the Carter Administration and the change in the nature of USIA and, indeed, the name. You witnessed all that in Washington. How do you feel about it now?

SATISFACTIONS AND DISAPPOINTMENTSAT THE LEVEL OF REGIONAL MANAGEMENT

NICHOLS: That assignment I had as deputy director for East Asia, working with Mort Smith, was a good way to wind up my Agency career. There was a certain amount of pride in getting to a level where you could make decisions about things on an area-wide basis. You felt you had some impact on Agency planning. There was also quite a bit of frustration in that period. I think my expectations were too high. I feel a lot of people's were, when we had the change of administration and then, for the first time in the history of the Agency, had a career officer named as director, as well as at all the top-level positions. I think we expected too much out of them. I know I met with a lot of disappointment. John Reinhardt, a man for whom I have great respect and who I have always liked personally, was responsible for getting me to various places in my career.

Q: Sure. He'd been focusing on the Far East a good deal.

NICHOLS: But I was frustrated with John. I was frustrated, and John still remains somewhat of an enigma to me. I remember at one staff meeting, John was fighting the idea of PAO conferences. I said, “You know, John, I think you're against these PAO conferences because you never were a PAO and therefore never saw their value.” It wasn't the wisest thing to say, and John gave me a funny look, but he never was a PAO, and I think that had something to do with his opposition. John was a CAO. He went from CAO in Tehran or someplace like that, to deputy director of East Asia. PAO conferences aren't a waste of time; they're very important.

Then Charlie Bray, John's deputy, wanted to massage all the words of everything you wrote, but never take any action about things. Mort and I were both frustrated by a lot of things that were going on. John didn't want the old-boy network going on personnel, yet there were some very important things about personnel that only the people in the area knew about, the chemistry at the posts, and what sort of combinations work well together. We in the AEA offices knew much more about the personnel. John would say to me when I protested a couple of assignments, “But Bob,” he'd say, “you go through that guy's record, and it doesn't show that.”

I would answer, “Yeah, well, a lot of performance records don't show what's really true.”

Then he said, “Okay. If he screws up, I'll back you up and pull him out of there.” He was going to wait 'til the guy screws up! We didn't agree on a lot of these things, but it was an exciting time in many ways, because we were still involved in the China thing. After “normalization,” and even before, we began to establish our posts in China.

Then there was this business you asked about a minute ago, about tailoring programs and so forth. Alan Carter and I got into it on that score regularly, because Alan was all for packaging everything on a worldwide basis. And he was adamant when it came to this. We felt that he wanted to homogenize all the Agency programs. Of course, we were fighting it in East Asia, so it probably was a good time to retire. (Laughs)

OPINIONS ON VALUES OF VARIOUS PARTS OF USIA PROGRAMS

Q: Another one of the major changes at that time was the amalgamation of CU into ICA, and there's still talk about whether that was a good idea on both sides of the fence. How do you feel about it?

NICHOLS: I thought the old way was crazy. Just because Senator Fulbright didn't want to taint the exchange program with propaganda, placing it under a propaganda agency. It didn't make any difference. All it meant was you had a domestic staff composed largely

of USIA officers sitting over in the State Department working with USIA officers abroad, where the CAOs in the embassies were all USIA officers anyhow. So it didn't really make much sense from the point of view of where the programs originated. Maybe to an American audience, but not to our foreign constituencies.

Q: It's still being advocated, however.

NICHOLS: So I understand. But I think cultural exchange properly belongs in the U.S. Information Agency. I think if there's a problem on it, the problem comes in terms of how much the U.S. Information Agency taints itself with being a propaganda agency, that is propaganda in its worst form. I think sometimes we, as a country, are much too sensitive about the connotation of that word, as opposed to our friends abroad, who think of “propaganda” more as in its original meaning of “information.” I mean, official information. So I think sometimes we're quibbling when we talk about that. Heavily slanted information, I am opposed to.

You see this with every turn of every administration, depending on the political bent of that administration. You watch every new administration go through the same problems —what do they call the AMSPECs now? They've got a new name for them—AMPARTS. They went through that whole business, the same thing that we went through back in the early days of Vietnam, about tainted speakers, people that were going out and being flak for U.S. policy, as opposed to people who were objectively speaking on things. That whole business of the writers down at the Voice of America, the ones that write the commentaries. The Voice is still going through that problem and will probably never stop going through it.

Q: Some things won't change.

NICHOLS: Some things won't change. But to me, I was a believer mostly in cultural programs. I believe in libraries. I like to see libraries that are tailored to the interests of the country. I believe in cultural exchanges, very strongly in the cultural exchanges. I

believe in programs like cultural presentations, representing the best of America. I believe in the speakers program. Speakers programs are marvelous. It just depends on who the speakers are, of course, but that's controllable.

The fast media, maybe it's because I'm not a great fan of television, because I have some doubts about what it's done to our own society. Newspapers, I feel that press programs are important, but they don't have a lasting effect. The programs that have a lasting effect are slow ones—the presentations, the exchange of persons, the libraries, book translation programs, that sort of thing, I think those are really important things for the Agency in the long run, and those are the things that interested me most when I was in it.

Q: You retired in 1979, so it's been a few years since that, and you've had a chance to think back and travel through some familiar areas. A final question, perhaps. Looking back on a career of achievement and satisfaction and rewards, would you do anything different?

NICHOLS: I'm sure I would. If I had gone into the Agency knowing what I knew when I left the Agency, I would have done a lot of things differently. I never would have made that statement in Davao! But certainly, a career in the Agency has to be one of the most exciting, rewarding things you can do. I always encourage young people to get interested in the Agency, because I think it's the most exciting part of the foreign service of the United States. You have more opportunities in Agency work, in being in the press and cultural section of an embassy to work with the people in a country than you do in any other part of an embassy, in a productive and positive way.

Q: A nice, pleasant note to end this on. Thank you.

End of interview